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The False Artaxerxes: Borges and the Dream of Chess

John T. Irwin

IN BORGES'S first collection of pure fictions, *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), the game of chess is mentioned in four of the volume's eight stories and alluded to in the epigraph to a fifth. Let me recall briefly three of these references. In the volume's final tale (the detective story that gives the collection its title), Stephen Albert, the murder victim, asks the killer Dr. Yu Tsun, "In a guessing game to which the answer is chess, which word is the only one prohibited?" To which Yu Tsun replies, "The word is *chess*."¹ In the volume's sixth story, "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," the narrator, summarizing Quain's literary career, outlines the plot of his detective novel *The God of the Labyrinth*: "An indecipherable assassination takes place in the initial pages; a leisurely discussion takes place toward the middle; a solution appears in the end. Once the enigma is cleared up, there is a long and retrospective paragraph which contains the following phrase: 'Everyone thought that the encounter of the two chess players was accidental.' This phrase allows one to understand that the solution is erroneous. The unquiet reader rereads the pertinent chapters and discovers *another* solution, the true one. The reader of this book is thus forcibly more discerning than the detective."² The third example is from the volume's opening story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In the tale Borges recalls a figure from his childhood named Herbert Ashe, an English engineer and friend of his father, who, Borges later realizes, was part of a group involved in the creation of the idealist world of Tlön and in the secret project of insinuating that fictive world into the real one. Borges remembers that when he was a boy the childless widower Ashe and Borges's father "would beat one another at chess, without saying a word," sharing one of those English friendships "which begin by avoiding intimacies and eventually eliminate speech altogether."³

One would assume that if an image occurs in half the stories in a collection, it reflects some central concern of the volume as a whole, and part of the rationale for listing these three examples in

the reverse order of their appearance in the book is to move backward toward the origin of that concern. In the first instance cited, chess is evoked as the answer to a riddle, the solution to a mystery; in the second, it is linked to the structure of a detective story; and in the third, it is associated with Borges's father and with the invention of a world of "extreme idealism" (T 24), a world created, as Borges says, by "the discipline of chess players" (T 34).

Chess has, of course, a long-standing connection with the detective genre. In the first Dupin story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), the narrator cites it as an example, along with draughts and whist, to illustrate the workings of the analytic power; and in the third Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter," Poe presents us with a scenario strongly reminiscent of a chess game—there is a king and queen, and a battle between two knights (Dupin is a Chevalier, and we must assume that his double the Minister D_____ is at least of equal rank), a battle for possession of a letter that concerns the queen's honor and that in the minister's hands could reduce the queen to being a pawn. Moreover, a chess game is one of the most frequently used images for the battle of wits between detective and criminal in the tradition of the genre, an image of the detective's attempt to double the thought processes of his opponent in order to end up one move ahead of him. This doubling of an opponent's thoughts, in which one plays out possible variations against an antithetical mirror image of one's own mind, is reflected in the physical structure of the game itself, for the opposing chess pieces at the start of the game face each other in a mirror-image relationship. Borges's association of the detective story with chess is, then, fairly easy to explain. But this still leaves the question of the game's link with Borges's father and with idealist philosophy. In making these associations in his first book of pure fictions, Borges seems simply to have transposed into art connections already present in real life. Borges's father was a chess player; he taught his son the game; and, as Borges tells us in "An Autobiographical Essay," he used the chessboard to begin his son's philosophical education: "When I was still quite young, he showed me, with the aid of a chessboard, the paradoxes of Zeno—Achilles and the tortoise, the unmoving flight of the arrow, the impossibility of motion. Later, without mentioning Berkeley's name, he did his best to teach me the rudiments of idealism."⁴

During Borges's visit to Hopkins in 1983, I asked him about the way his father had demonstrated Zeno's paradoxes at the chessboard. He said that he had used the pieces aligned on the first rank, showing him that before he could travel the distance between the

king's rook and the queen's rook he had first to go half that distance (that is, from the king's rook to the king), but that before he could go from the king's rook to the king he had first to go half *that* distance (that is, from the king's rook to the king's knight), and so on. To the extent that the paradoxes of Zeno reveal "the impossibility of motion," they are in effect tropes of helplessness, of impotence. Their moral is that nothing can really be accomplished in this world. A person cannot even move from point A to point B, since between the two points yawns an abyss of infinite regression. And if motion is impossible, then our physical world in which motion seems constantly to occur must be an illusion. This world does not have a real, independent (that is, material) existence; its existence is wholly apparenial, a function of mental states. From the paradoxes of Zeno, then, it is a short step, as the passage from "An Autobiographical Essay" implies, to the "rudiments of idealism" and the philosophy of George Berkeley. But if the paradoxes of Zeno are, as we have suggested, tropes of impotence, then a father's decision to teach them to his young son might seem at best ill considered and at worst faintly hostile. Indeed, if there is an element of veiled hostility in this act—a sense on the father's part that he has accomplished little of what he set out to do, not because he failed, but because nothing could really be achieved in a world where motion is an illusion; and a warning to the son not to show his father up, not to defeat him, by trying to accomplish something on his own—then certainly the chessboard is the right place for the father to convey that message, since virtually every psychoanalytic reading of the game's structure and symbolism sees it as a ritual sublimation of father murder.

The game's goal is, of course, the checkmate of the opponent's king. One seeks to place the king under a direct attack from which he is powerless to escape, so that on the next move he can be captured and removed from the board. (Indeed, the word *checkmate* derives from the Persian *Shah mat*, "the king is dead.") But this capture and removal (the killing of the king) never actually takes place, for the game always ends one move before this with the king's immobilization in check. Which is simply to say that in the game's sublimation of aggression, the murder of the father even in a symbolic form is repressed. According to the psychoanalyst and chess master Reuben Fine, since "genetically, chess is more often than not taught to the boy by his father, or by a father substitute," it naturally "becomes a means of working out the father-son rivalry."⁵ In this ritual mime of the conflicts surrounding the family romance, the mother plays a major role. In his essay on the American chess

champion Paul Morphy, Ernest Jones points out that “in attacking the father the most potent assistance is afforded by the mother (Queen)” (23), the strongest piece on the board. As one chess critic has noted, “chess is a matter of both father murder and attempts to prevent it. This mirror function of chess is of extreme importance; obviously the player appears both in a monstrous and a virtuous capacity—planning parricide, at the same time warding it off; recreating Oedipal fantasy, yet trying to disrupt it. Yet the stronger urge is the monstrous one; the player wants to win, to kill the father rather than defend him, although one could clearly speculate on the problems of players who habitually lose at last” (100–101). Fine argues that the king not only represents the father but, as a hand-manipulated, carved figure, “stands for the boy’s penis in the phallic stage, and hence rearouses the castration anxiety characteristic of that period. . . . It is the father pulled down to the boy’s size. Unconsciously it gives the boy a chance to say to the father: ‘To the outside world you are big and strong, but when we get right down to it, you’re just as weak as I am’” (42).

That Borges understood this Oedipal component of chess is clear from a passage in the last book he published before his death, *Atlas* (1984), a collection of short essays devoted for the most part to geographic locales associated with the psychic terrain of his past. The essay on Athens begins:

On the first morning, my first day in Athens, I was proffered the following dream. In front of me stood a row of books filling a long shelf. They formed a set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, one of my lost paradises. I took down a volume at random. I looked up Coleridge: the article had an end but no beginning. I looked up Crete: it concluded but did not begin. I looked up the entry on Chess. At that point the dream shifted. On an elevated stage in an amphitheater filled to capacity with an attentive audience, I was playing chess with my father, who was also the False Artaxerxes. (His ears having been cut off, Artaxerxes was found sleeping by one of his many wives; she ran her hand over his skull very gently so as not to awaken him; presently he was killed.) I moved a piece; my antagonist did not move anything but, by an act of magic, he erased one of my pieces. This procedure was repeated various times.

I awoke and told myself: *I am in Greece, where everything began, assuming that things, as opposed to articles in the dream’s encyclopedia, have a beginning.*⁶

It seems only fitting that this dream, with its images of castration and father murder, should have been “proffered” to Borges in Athens, the city where the blind parricide Oedipus ultimately sought shelter and where he was welcomed by Theseus, who, according to

Plutarch, cannot himself “escape the charge of parricide” because of his “neglect of the command about the sail” that caused his father’s death.⁷ (Recall that when Theseus left for Crete to slay the Minotaur, his father Aegeus, the ruler of Athens, told him to have his crew hoist a white sail upon returning if Theseus was alive and a black sail if he was dead. Theseus forgot his father’s command, and when his ship returned flying a black sail, Aegeus, in despair at his son’s supposed death, leapt from a cliff.)

Borges’s dream in Athens begins as a search for origins, an attempt to recover or return to a “lost paradise” represented in the dream by a set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In terms of an individual’s biological origin, that lost paradise is the maternal womb, and the fact that Borges’s attempt to penetrate the “lost paradise” of the encyclopedia (by delving into one of its volumes) leads almost immediately to an image of conflict with the father and the threat of castration suggests that the *Britannica* functions here as a figure of the mother’s body. In the dream Borges takes a volume of the *Britannica* from the shelf (the volume for the womblike letter C, to judge from its entries) and finds that in the first two articles he reads (on Coleridge and Crete) the attempt to return to origin is frustrated: each article has an end “but no beginning.” The reference to Crete seems to be a fairly straightforward allusion to the island’s legendary labyrinth, that underground enclosure of winding passageways that Freud interprets as an image of the matrix, an enclosure which the hero Theseus enters and from which he is reborn, with the help of the umbilical thread, after having slain the monster, who symbolizes the fear of castration or death that the son must face when he tries to rival the father by entering the mother’s body.

In contrast, the dream reference to Coleridge seems less clear at first glance, but a passage from Borges’s essay on nightmares in the 1980 volume *Seven Nights* gives us a clue. According to Borges, Coleridge maintains that

it doesn’t matter what we dream, that the dream searches for explanations. He gives an example: a lion suddenly appears in this room and we are all afraid; the fear has been caused by the image of the lion. But in dreams the reverse can occur. We feel oppressed, and then search for an explanation. I, absurdly but vividly, dream that a sphinx has lain down next to me. The sphinx is not the cause of my fear, it is an explanation of my feeling of oppression. Coleridge adds that people who have been frightened by imaginary ghosts have gone mad. On the other hand, a person who dreams a ghost can wake up and, within a few seconds, regain his composure.

I have had—and I still have—many nightmares. The most terrible, the

one that struck me as the most terrible, I used in a sonnet. It went like this: I was in my room; it was dawn (possibly that was the time of the dream). At the foot of my bed was a king, a very ancient king, and I knew in the dream that he was the King of the North, of Norway. He did not look at me; his blind stare was fixed on the ceiling. I felt the terror of his presence. I saw the king, I saw his sword, I saw his dog. Then I woke. But I continued to see the king for a while, because he had made such a strong impression on me. Retold, my dream is nothing; dreamt, it was terrible.⁸

The progression of images in this passage forms an instructive gloss on the associative logic of Borges's dream at Athens. Starting with the name of Coleridge and the dictum that "the dream searches for explanations" by creating images which correspond with, and thus account for, emotions we feel, the passage introduces the example of a lion as a symbolic expression of fear; to which Borges adds the example of his own dream that a sphinx has lain down beside him, the image of the sphinx serving as "an explanation of my feeling of oppression." The associative link between the images of lion and sphinx seems plain: the multiform sphinx is traditionally depicted with a lion's body. But the sphinx is, of course, the monster associated with Oedipus. She threatens the hero with death if he doesn't solve her riddle; her name (*strangler*, from the Greek *sphingein*, origin of the English *sphincter*) evokes the dangerous, constricting passageway out of and into the mother's womb; and her form, with one shape issuing from another, suggests the child's body emerging from the mother's at birth, according to Otto Rank.

The passage's imagery now shifts from the figure of a sphinx to that of a ghost, with the dictum that people frightened by an imaginary ghost in waking life have gone mad but that those who dream a ghost can wake up and regain their composure. The connection between sphinx and ghost is unclear at first, until we recall that in Borges's third detective story, "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth," the three faceless corpses found in the labyrinth are those of a king, a slave, and a lion and that the explanation for the crime contrived by the killer is that the three have been murdered by the ghost of the king's vizier. The murderer is in fact this same king's vizier Zaid, who, along with his black slave and lion, had come to the small Cornish village of Pentreath masquerading as the king Ibn Hakkan, built the labyrinth, lured the real king into it, killed him and then obliterated his face (along with that of the slave and lion) to cover the previous imposture and effect his escape. Given the associative link between sphinx and lion in Borges's discussion of nightmares and that between king,

ghost, and lion in "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari," the progression of images in the nightmare passage becomes easier to follow: The image of the lion (the king of the beasts) serves as a middle term connecting the image of the sphinx (with its lion's body) to that of the king. But this linking of sphinx and king also implicitly connects the images of sphinx and ghost, for the king in Borges's nightmare is clearly coded as a spectral apparition. Thus the associative chain underlying the passage from the nightmare essay runs: lion (king of the beasts) / sphinx (creature with a lion's body who tests King Oedipus) / king / ghost (of a king). But in the passage Borges reverses the order of the last two links in the chain by moving directly from the dream image of the sphinx to a discussion of ghosts in waking life versus ghosts in dreams, and only then going on to describe his "most terrible" nightmare about "a very ancient king." Since it is dawn and the king is at the foot of Borges's bed, one assumes that in the dreamed scene Borges is just awakening from a night's sleep and that the uncertainty as to whether he is, within the dream, awake or dreaming, whether the figure of the king is an imaginary ghost or a ghost in a dream, forms part of the dream image's terror, a frightening sense of ambiguity that is confirmed when Borges actually awakens and yet continues "to see the king for a while" because the image has "made such a strong impression."

That the figure of the "ancient king" is coded as a ghost seems obvious from the way in which the account of Borges's nightmare grows out of his comment about the difference between thinking we see and dreaming we see a ghost. Moreover, I would suggest that this "King of the North" is a very specific ghost indeed. Borges identifies him as the king of Norway, but that is undoubtedly a displacement within the dream. He is the king of Denmark, the ghost of Hamlet's father returned to confront his son with the Oedipal task of avenging the father's murder and with the epistemological dilemma of whether this demanding appearance is a real ghost, a dream, or a hallucination. (Recall that at the start of Shakespeare's play we are told that Hamlet had killed Fortinbras, the King of Norway, in combat, thus causing young Fortinbras to seek revenge for his father's death.) In the dream the king's "blind stare" is "fixed on the ceiling," at once a reminder of the punishment which Oedipus inflicted on himself for incest and parricide, for usurping the true king's place, and an evocation of Borges's own father who went blind from a hereditary eye ailment, an ailment which he in turn passed on to *his* son who also went blind.

Indeed, the imagery of the dream suggests the extent to which

Borges may have experienced his blindness on some unconscious level as an Oedipal transmission. In the dream, Borges sees the king, his sword, and his dog. The sword would seem to be both a phallic symbol of the father's authority and a metonym for the punishment (castration) meted out to those who would usurp that authority; while the king's dog probably bears something of the same relationship to the dreamer that the Sphinx does to Oedipus and the Minotaur does to Theseus—a symbol of the animal (that is, sexual) realm, who confronts the aspirant (son) with a life-threatening test by which the real king (or his lawful successor) is distinguished from usurpers or impostors. At the end of "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari," one of the characters describes the cowardly murderer of the king as "a good-for-nothing who, before becoming a nobody in death, wanted one day to look back on having been a king or having been taken for a king."⁹ The message seems plain enough: though the usurper might be able to murder a king, he could not take the king's place; not every son who can kill his father can become a father.

Now if we are correct in thinking that the image of the encyclopedia entry on Coleridge in Borges's dream at Athens represents the dreamwork's condensation of the chain of associations grouped around Coleridge's name in the essay on nightmares, then it seems clear that the progression of images in the Athens dream is essentially the same as that in the nightmare essay, with two revealing substitutions in the signifying chain. Starting with the name of Coleridge, the passage in the essay from *Seven Nights* moves first to the image of a lion, and then to that of a sphinx, a lion-bodied animal whose name evokes the figure of Oedipus. From the sphinx, the passage shifts to the image of ghosts (either hallucinated or dreamed) and then ends with the nightmare figure of an ancient, blind king holding a sword, the reference to ghosts serving to associate the dream's image of the king of Norway (that is, Denmark) with the opening of *Hamlet* and thus code the blind king as the ghost of a murdered father appearing to his son. In a similar manner the chain of associations in Borges's dream at Athens begins by invoking the name of Coleridge but then instead of moving on to the image of the sphinx (that is, to a direct allusion to Oedipus), the dream obliquely calls up a screen-figure of Oedipus (Theseus) through the reference to the encyclopedia entry on Crete (that is, the Cretan labyrinth, the Minotaur, and the Minotaur's slayer). In place of Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother, stands Theseus, the man who penetrates the symbolic womb of the labyrinth and accidentally causes the death of his father through an act of for-

getfulness. From the reference to Crete, the dream then shifts to the encyclopedia entry on Chess, the veiled allusion to the womblike, Cretan labyrinth giving way to the image of the labyrinthine network of a chessboard on which one symbolically kills the father. And this image in turn suddenly shifts to that of a real chess game and brings us to the second major substitution in the signifying chain. For instead of culminating, as the passage from Borges's essay on nightmares did, with the terrifying image of a blind king holding a sword, the Athens dream ends with an image of Borges's own father (who went blind) as a false king mutilated by a sword. And with this final figuration the reason for the substitutions in the associative chain becomes obvious.

In the passage from the essay on nightmares, Borges can directly allude to Oedipus through the mention of the sphinx precisely because the blind king is *not* explicitly identified as Borges's father. But in the Athens dream the figure whom Borges confronts in a chess game (a ritual sublimation of father murder) *is* so identified; and consequently, the direct Oedipal allusion which followed the mention of Coleridge's name in the nightmare essay is repressed by Borges in favor of a veiled reference to the Oedipal screen-figure Theseus, the man who welcomed the aged, blind Oedipus to Athens (remember that the aged, blind Borges is dreaming this dream in Athens) and who became Oedipus's spiritual son.

Perhaps the most striking detail in the Athens dream is the description of Borges's father as "the False Artaxerxes," whose ears had been cropped. It seems only fitting that since the dream begins with the image of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, we should turn to that work for an explanation of this figure. The eleventh edition of the *Britannica* identifies the false Artaxerxes as one "Bessus, satrap of Bactria and Sogdiana under Darius III": "When Alexander pursued the Persian king [Darius III] on his flight to the East (summer 330), Bessus with some of the other conspirators deposed Darius and shortly after killed him. He then tried to organize a national resistance against the Macedonian conqueror in the eastern provinces, proclaimed himself king and adopted the name Artaxerxes." Taken prisoner by treachery, Bessus was sent by Alexander to Ecbatana where he was condemned to death: "Before his execution his nose and ears were cut off, according to the Persian custom; we learn from the Behistun inscription that Darius I punished the usurpers in the same way."¹⁰ Bessus, the false Artaxerxes, was then a usurper, someone able to kill a king but unable to take the king's place, an impostor like Zaid, the murderer in "Ibn Hakkan." In Borges's dream the cutting off of the usurper's ears is an obvious

image of castration, reminiscent of the destruction of Oedipus's eyeballs with the pin of Jocasta's brooch; and the suggestion of maternal complicity in the attack on the father is present as well: "His ears having been cut off, Artaxerxes was found sleeping by one of his many wives; she ran her hand over his skull very gently so as not to awaken him; presently he was killed."

While the image of paternal mutilation and death in Borges's dream would seem to be simply an expression of the son's desire to inflict on the father the same violence with which he feels threatened, the nature of the paternal threat to the son's power, as figured in the moves of the chess game, is more complex than that reading suggests. For the image of the father in Borges's dream is not that of a true king, an absolute ruler with complete power to inflict whatever injury he chooses on the son, but that of a false king, a usurper, who is castrated and put to death. Which is to say that the father in Borges's dream threatens the son's potency by presenting himself as a castrated son trapped within a generational line and doomed to death, threatens him by showing that the father is not an absolute source but merely the son's immediate predecessor who has been rendered helpless, made unoriginal, by his own predecessor. Describing the moves of the chess game, Borges says, "I moved a piece; my antagonist did not move anything but, by an act of magic, he erased one of my pieces. This procedure was repeated various times." One cannot help but recall that Borges's father had used the chessboard not only to teach his son the game but to acquaint him with the paradoxes of Zeno, tropes of impotence figuring, as Borges says, "the impossibility of motion." The logic of the scene is plain: To play a game of chess, one must move pieces from one square to another until finally one places the king in a check from which he cannot escape. But if checkmating the king is a symbolic murder of the father, then the father who teaches this game to his son might well try to protect himself from the Oedipal combat for paternal power by convincing his son that no such power exists for them to fight over. Thus in the dreamed chess game, Borges moves a piece, but his father does not move anything (motion is impossible). Instead, "by an act of magic" (the paradoxes of Zeno which reveal the magical, that is, illusory, nature of action), he erases one of his son's pieces; he makes it vanish like the dream it is. In erasing his son's chess piece with these magical paradoxes, the father castrates him not physically by exercising superior strength, but psychologically by showing him that in this illusory world nothing can be done, that everyone is helpless, father and son alike. (Recall in this regard that Borges's poem "Chess"

[1960] concludes by questioning the traditional scholastic explanation of the origin of motion which traces movement, through a series of intermediate causes, back to an unmoved first mover, the All-Father: "God moves the player, he, in turn, the piece. / But what god beyond God begins the round / of dust and time and dream and agonies?"¹¹) No wonder, then, that when Borges awakens from this dream in Athens of unreachable origins and illusory grounds, this dream in which he discovers, during the course of a chess game, the person who conceived him depicted as a sleeping king (that is, when Borges discovers himself [the dreamer of the Athens dream] as a figure in the dream of the Other), no wonder that the force of the dream persists into waking consciousness as a doubt about whether origins and original power exist in real life, a persistence of the dream state that seems to blur the distinction between reality and illusion (as when Borges awakened from his nightmare of the blind King of the North yet "continued to see the king for a while"): "I awoke and told myself: *I am in Greece, where everything began, assuming that things, as opposed to articles in the dream's encyclopedia, have a beginning.*"

When one sees the psychological point of Borges's association of his father with the game of chess, then "the encounter of the two chess players" (the elder Borges and Herbert Ashe) in the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" seems far from "accidental" indeed, to use Herbert Quain's words from his detective novel *The God of the Labyrinth*. And the encounter takes on still greater significance when we consider that "the faded English engineer Herbert Ashe" is, according to Borges's friend José Bianco, simply "a portrait" of Borges's father.¹² That Borges should imagine a chess game in which his father competes against "a portrait" of himself is not surprising, given his use of the game's mirror-image structure to evoke the mental duel between antithetical doubles in the detective story. But this encrypted image of a specular chess game played by the father against himself becomes even more interesting when we recall that, at the beginning of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," fatherhood and mirroring are invoked as analogous forms of duplicating human beings. Borges says that he owed the discovery of the idealist worlds of the story's title to "the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia." He and his friend Bioy Casares had dined one evening and talked late into the night. During their conversation, Borges noticed that "from the far end of the corridor, the mirror was watching us; and we discovered, with the inevitability of discoveries made late at night, that mirrors have something grotesque about them. Then Bioy Casares recalled that one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar

had stated that mirrors and copulation are abominable, since they both multiply the numbers of man" (T 17). Asking for the source of this "memorable sentence," Borges is told that it comes from the article on Uqbar in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. As it happens, the villa where they are staying has a copy of the reference work, but try as they might, they cannot find the article on Uqbar. The next day Bioy telephones to say that he has found in another copy of the work the article in question and that the passage he had paraphrased the night before reads: "For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply it and extend it" (T 18). Borges and Bioy compare the two versions of the encyclopedia and find that the sole difference between them is the additional four pages of the article on Uqbar, a discovery that ultimately reveals the existence of a secret project pursued by a band of intellectuals over the years to introduce the idealist world of Tlön into this world and thereby alter the shape of reality.

The opening image of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" ("the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia") is almost certainly an allusion to the fact that in the Middle Ages a work of encyclopedic knowledge was commonly referred to in Latin as a *speculum*, a mirror (for example, the thirteenth-century *Speculum majus* of Vincent of Beauvais), a name that figures the encyclopedia as a written mirror of the universe. Given the sexual overtones of "conjunction," the opening image also sets the stage for the subsequent association of a mirror, first with copulation, and then with fatherhood. And if, in this conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia, the mirror is equated with the male principle, then the encyclopedia would obviously be equated with the female (the matrix)—the same association found in Borges's dream at Athens where the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is described as a "lost paradise" and then immediately linked to the image of the womblike labyrinth through the reference to Crete. (Significantly enough, the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is "a literal if inadequate reprint of the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*" [T 17].)

If for Borges mirror and encyclopedia are gender coded as male and female respectively, then the description Borges gives in *Seven Nights* of two of his recurring nightmares, two dreams that frequently blend into one, seems like a gloss on that conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia that begins "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius":

I have two nightmares which often become confused with one another. I have the nightmare of the labyrinth, which comes, in part, from a steel engraving I saw in a French book when I was a child. In this engraving

were the Seven Wonders of the World, among them the labyrinth of Crete. The labyrinth was a great amphitheater, a very high amphitheater. . . . In this closed structure—ominously closed—there were cracks. I believed when I was a child (or I now believe I believed) that if one had a magnifying glass powerful enough, one could look through the cracks and see the Minotaur in the terrible center of the labyrinth.

My other nightmare is that of the mirror. The two are not distinct, as it only takes two facing mirrors to construct a labyrinth. . . .

I always dream of labyrinths or of mirrors. In the dream of the mirror another vision appears, another terror of my nights, and that is the idea of the mask. Masks have always scared me. No doubt I felt in my childhood that someone who was wearing a mask was hiding something horrible. These are my most terrible nightmares: I see myself reflected in a mirror, but the reflection is wearing a mask. I am afraid to pull the mask off, afraid to see my real face, which I imagine to be hideous. There may be leprosy or evil or something more terrible than anything I am capable of imagining. (SN 32–33)

As the dream at Athens begins with the image of a book (the *Britannica*) and immediately moves (via the reference to Crete) to the image of the labyrinth, so this passage from the nightmare essay begins with the image of the labyrinth and moves immediately to the image of a book—a French book in which Borges saw a steel engraving of the labyrinth when he was a child. Though Borges does not say what kind of book it was, the mention of a “steel engraving” recalls a remark from his “Autobiographical Essay” about the books he enjoyed most as a child in his father’s library: “I have forgotten most of the faces of that time . . . and yet I vividly remember so many of the steel engravings in *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia* and in the *Britannica*” (A 209).

In the engraving in the French book the labyrinth is shown as “a closed structure,” a “very high amphitheater,” a description that gives added meaning to the setting for the chess game in the Athens dream: “On an elevated stage in an amphitheater filled to capacity with an attentive audience, I was playing chess with my father, who was also the False Artaxerxes.” That Borges imagines the labyrinth as an enclosed amphitheater suggests yet again that the amphitheater which serves as the site of the chess game with his father, a game of kings and queens played out on a labyrinthine network of squares, represents the maternal space of origin for whose possession they are competing. And the fact that the labyrinth as symbol of the matrix, as the scene of the contest with the father, is closely associated in these passages with another womb symbol (the image of a book as a “lost paradise”) suggests that the real-life arena into which the

Oedipal struggle between Borges and his father had been displaced was not the game of chess but the realm of literature in which the virgin space of the page, inseminated by ink from the phallic pen, can produce an offspring longer-lived than any child, an offspring almost immortal if the author only be original enough. Borges's father in addition to being a lawyer had, of course, been a minor poet and fiction writer before he went blind, and, as Borges recalls in his "Autobiographical Essay," "From the time I was a boy, when blindness came to him, it was tacitly understood that I had to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. . . . I was expected to be a writer" (A 211). An oddly contradictory legacy: that the son fulfill the literary destiny denied to the father by becoming the successful writer his parent had never been, in effect surpassing, defeating, the father in an implicit literary competition.

If the images that dominate Borges's two recurring nightmares (the mirror and the labyrinth) are associated respectively with fatherhood and motherhood, then Borges's assertion that "the two are not distinct" suggests a union of male and female principles reminiscent of "the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia" at the beginning of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." This blending of mirror and labyrinth in Borges's dreams, like the conjunction of mirror and encyclopedia in the tale, seems to be the symbolic figuration of a primal scene, an evocation of the dreamer's parents in the act of engendering the dreamer. And to judge from the imagery that follows from this blending of mirror and labyrinth in Borges's account, the product of that union is experienced as something monstrous—a masked figure whose mask conceals "something more terrible than anything" the dreamer is "capable of imagining."

According to the associative logic of the passage, two of Borges's nightmare images, in becoming "confused with one another," are in effect equated with one another—the labyrinth and the mirror. As the labyrinth contains a monstrous figure (the Minotaur with a man's body and a bull's head), so the mirror contains an equally monstrous figure (a masked man with a human body and a concealed face). In one case the bull's head, in the other the masked face, makes the figure terrifying. But what is that frightening content at once concealed and evoked by the masked face and animal head? Recall that in his entry on the Minotaur in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1967), Borges says that the Cretan labyrinth was built "to confine and keep hidden" Queen Pasiphae's "monstrous son,"¹³ the product of an unnatural union of animal and human. And if the bull's head is the visible trace of a monstrous copulation, then are

we to assume, given the equation of the bull-headed monster of the labyrinth and the masked figure in the mirror, that the masked face also evokes the image of a monstrous copulation, or more precisely, evokes the image of copulation as something monstrous? Noting the “revulsion for the act of fatherhood . . . or copulation” found in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges’s biographer Rodríguez Monegal wonders how much this feeling “has to do with the discovery of the primal scene through the complicity of a mirror” when Borges was a child. He points out as evidence for this possibility a passage from Borges’s poem “The Mirror”:

Infinite I see them, elementary
 executors of an old pact,
 to multiply the world as the generative
 act, sleepless and fatal.

(JLB 33)

Monegal notes that in the tale “The Sect of the Phoenix” (1952) Borges imagines a pagan cult bound together by a shared secret that assures its members immortality, a secret hinted at in the tale but never named—the act of copulation. In the story Borges says that though the secret “is transmitted from generation to generation . . . usage does not favor mothers teaching it to their sons.” He continues, “Initiation into the mystery is the task of individuals of the lowest order. . . . The Secret is sacred, but it is also somewhat ridiculous. The practice of the mystery is furtive and even clandestine and its adepts do not speak about it. There are no respectable words to describe it, but it is understood that all words refer to it, or better, that they inevitably allude to it. . . . A kind of sacred horror prevents some of the faithful from practicing the extremely simple ritual; the others despise them for it, but they despise themselves even more.” To many members of the sect, the secret seemed “paltry, distressing, vulgar and (what is even stranger) incredible. They could not reconcile themselves to the fact that their ancestors had lowered themselves to such conduct.”¹⁴ When asked by the critic Ronald Christ about the secret shared by the sect of the Phoenix, Borges replied, “The act is what Whitman says ‘the divine husband knows, from the work of fatherhood.’—When I first heard about this act, when I was a boy, I was shocked, shocked to think that my mother, my father had performed it. It is an amazing discovery, no? But then too it is an act of immortality, a rite of immortality, isn’t it?”¹⁵

If, as we have suggested, the masked figure in the mirror evokes for Borges the bull-headed monster of the labyrinth (“it only takes

two facing mirrors to construct a labyrinth”), that is, evokes the monstrous offspring of an unnatural copulation, and if that bull-headed figure symbolically represents in turn the act of copulation as something monstrous, as the assault of a male animal on the mother (Freud notes that in the fantasy of the primal scene the child frequently misinterprets parental intercourse as an act of sadomasochistic violence by the father against the mother), then the terror that Borges feels at the nightmare image of seeing his masked reflection, a terror both of the mask and of pulling off the mask to see the real face beneath, seems to be compounded of two related emotions. First, there is probably, in Monegal’s words, a “revulsion for the act of fatherhood . . . or copulation” (*JLB* 33), a sense (left over from childhood or adolescence) of the reproductive act as terrifying or humiliating, as an act unworthy of those godlike beings one’s parents, and as an origin unworthy of oneself, unworthy of that spiritual entity which finds itself imprisoned in the earthly cave of the body (with its physical constraints and sexual drives) as surely as the Minotaur (a symbol of the sun during its daily descent into the underworld) is imprisoned in the subterranean labyrinth. And what is particularly terrifying in this regard about the dream image is that while the mirror, a traditional figure of reflective self-consciousness, appears to contain, to restrain within its verge, the frightening visage that evokes the animal body, we know that the reflective self which the mirror symbolizes is equally contained within, and subject to the instinctual imperatives of, that body.

The second emotion the dream image seems to express is the son’s feeling of helplessness, his feeling of being trapped in the cycle of generation, doomed to repeat and transmit this cycle by doing the thing his father did. Indeed, for Borges, part of the peculiar terror of the masked figure in the mirror seems to be that it not only evokes the primal scene as the bestial copulation of a male animal with the mother, it also suggests that the face hidden beneath the mask worn by the son’s mirror-image is not his own but his father’s, suggests that, in this reversal of the master/slave relationship between self and mirror-image, the son is simply a reflection of the father helplessly repeating his physical gestures, trapped within a corporeal body and a material world only because he has been physically engendered.

All of which brings us back to the image of Borges’s father teaching him the paradoxes of Zeno and idealist philosophy at the chessboard and to the question of what it was that Borges learned from that teaching. For to judge from the number of stories in which the theme recurs, the lesson would seem to be that the most

powerful defense the self can muster against external threats to its own integrity, against sexual conflict and the threat of checkmate, is a massive reinterpretation of the surrounding world that substitutes mind for body, the intellectual for the sexual—a substitution whose autobiographical dimension is almost always present in the Borgesian text. In “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*,” for example, this sublimation of the bodily is carried to an extreme in the image of a world (*Tlön*) where mental states are the only reality: “The men of that planet conceive of the universe as a series of mental processes, whose unfolding is to be understood only as a time sequence” (T 24). Since “the nations of that planet are congenitally idealist” (T 23), there is “only one discipline, that of psychology” (T 24). Consequently, “among the doctrines of *Tlön*, none has occasioned greater scandal than the doctrine of materialism. . . . To clarify the general understanding of this unlikely thesis, one eleventh century heresiarch offered the parable of nine copper coins, which enjoyed in *Tlön* the same noisy reputation as did the Eleatic paradoxes of Zeno in their day” (T 26).

The irony, of course, is that in an idealist world like *Tlön* a parable of materialism seems as paradoxical as the antimaterialist parables of Zeno seem in ours. But this mention of the paradoxes of Zeno also suggests the autobiographical link between the imaginary world of *Tlön* and the detail of Herbert Ashe’s chess games with Borges’s father. For if the fictive chess games between the elder Borges and Ashe (a veiled portrait of Borges’s father) are based on those real games during which the elder Borges taught his son the paradoxes of Zeno, and if, as Borges suggests in “*An Autobiographical Essay*,” it was a natural transition from these paradoxes to his father’s instructing him in “the rudiments of idealism” without ever “mentioning Berkeley’s name” (T 207), then that trajectory in Borges’s personal life—from paradoxes at the chessboard demonstrating “the impossibility of motion” to a philosophical system that treats the material world as an illusion—is evoked in the story by having the same person who plays chess with Borges’s father be one of the secret inventors of an imaginary idealist world, a world created through the writing of its fictive encyclopedia, through fiction writing.

In effect, *Tlön* is a world of perfect sublimation, and its significance for Borges is a function of the way in which his knowledge of Berkeley’s idealism originated from a scene of sublimated conflict with his father at the chessboard, a scene which suggested idealist philosophy as an effective means of extending to life as a whole chess’s sublimation of (sexual) violence, its transformation of physical

conflict into a mental duel where opponents match wits but remain ultimately untouchable because physical motion is an impossibility. No wonder, then, that the world of Tlön is described as exhibiting “the discipline of chess players” (T 34) or that one of the members of that “benevolent secret society” which “came together” in the seventeenth century “to invent a country” (the society which counted Herbert Ashe among its latterday members) was “George Berkeley” (T 31).

The imaginary world of Tlön represents for Borges, then, the substitution of a mental life for a physical one, of inventing stories for living them. Recalling his boyhood in “An Autobiographical Essay,” Borges says, “I was always very nearsighted and wore glasses, and I was rather frail. As most of my people had been soldiers . . . and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action” (A 208). In one of the essays in *Other Inquisitions*, Borges speaks of his as “a lifetime dedicated less to living than to reading,” and he recalls that “Plotinus was said to be ashamed to dwell in a body”¹⁶ so devoted was he to the life of the mind, a remark that Borges applied to himself and to his own lifetime devotion to the imagination in a conversation we had during his visit to Hopkins in 1983.

Given that Borges’s predilection for idealist philosophy is to some degree a function of this philosophy’s valorization of mind at the expense of body (a valorization that precisely suited the temperament of a bookish child who knew that he was not destined to be a man of action), and given further that Borges’s acquaintance with the principles of idealist philosophy began as a child within the context of a combative game that favored mental acuity rather than physical strength, a game of sublimated father-murder taught him by his own father, it is certainly not surprising that in those stories of Borges’s concerned with idealist philosophy there is usually present some form of veiled father/son competition, a competition in which the son not infrequently tries to effect a wholly mental procreation, tries to occupy the place of the father by imagining or dreaming into existence a son of his own. Thus in “The Circular Ruins” the magician sets out “to dream a man” into existence, “to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality.”¹⁷ But the relationship of dreamer and dreamed soon becomes in the story that of father and son: “When he closed his eyes, he thought: *Now I will be with my son. Or, more rarely: The son I have engendered is waiting for me and will not exist if I do not go to him*” (61). In order to keep his son from ever knowing that he is merely a mental apparition, the magician wipes out “all memory of his years of apprenticeship”:

Of all the creatures that people the earth, Fire was the only one who knew his son to be a phantom. This memory, which at first calmed him, ended by tormenting him. He feared lest his son should meditate on this abnormal privilege and by some means find out he was a mere simulacrum. Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man's dreams—what an incomparable humiliation, what madness! Any father is interested in the sons he has procreated (or permitted) out of the mere confusion of happiness; it was natural that the wizard should fear for the future of that son whom he had thought out entrail by entrail, feature by feature, in a thousand and one secret nights. (62)

But what the magician finally discovers is that father and son share the same substance, that he (the magician) can dream a phantom man into existence only because he is himself a phantom dreamed by another—a realization that comes to the magician when the ruined temple in which he dwells is engulfed by a forest fire, a fire that, as its flames caress him “without heat or combustion,” claims him as its own.

As I said at the start, the game of chess is mentioned in four out of the eight stories in *The Garden of Forking Paths* and alluded to in the epigraph to a fifth. That fifth is “The Circular Ruins,” and its epigraph, taken from chapter four of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, runs “And if he left off dreaming about you. . . .” The line occurs in the scene where Alice, in the company of the mirror-image twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee, comes upon the sleeping Red King. As you recall, at the start of the book Alice falls asleep in the drawing room and dreams that she climbs through the mirror above the mantelpiece into the drawing room of Looking-glass House. When she steps outside the house, Alice finds that the garden is laid out like a chessboard, and her subsequent movements become part of a bizarre chess game. Gazing at the sleeping Red King, Tweedledee asks Alice what she thinks he's dreaming about. When she says that nobody can guess that, Tweedledee replies,

“Why, about *you*! . . . And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?”

“Where I am now, of course,” said Alice.

“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!”

“If that there King was to wake,” added Tweedledum, “you'd go out—bang!—just like a candle!”¹⁸

In the kind of Aleph-like oscillation of container and contained that obsessed Borges, Alice dreams the Red King, who dreams Alice, who dreams the Red King, and so on in an endless progression/regression. And just as Alice's mental existence as "a sort of thing" in the Red King's dream is evoked in an image of fire (if he awakens, she will go out like the flame of a candle—the traditional figuration of mind as light), so in "The Circular Ruins" fire is also invoked as a figure of a purely mental existence ("Of all the creatures that people the earth, Fire was the only one who knew his son to be a phantom").

What the epigraph to "The Circular Ruins" does in effect is to assimilate the relationship between the magician and his son, each of whom is an image in the dream of another, to that between Alice and the Red King, who dream one another, thus associating the context of the latter scene (a chess game) with the phantasmatic father-son relationship of the former. (Recall that when Alice comes upon the Red King, she is playing the role of a white pawn in the chess game, so that there is a mutually threatening quality to their encounter: if the King awakens, Alice goes out of existence, say the mirror-image twins; but on the other hand, when Alice, as a white pawn, finally reaches the eight rank and is promoted to a queen, she checkmates the Red King, which is to say that at the end of the game it is she who awakens from her dream and the Red King who goes out of existence.) "The Circular Ruins" and its epigraph bring together, then, in one spot those themes of fatherhood, mirroring, chess, dreams, and idealist philosophy that haunt Borges's work, images whose conjunction was established for Borges in a childhood scene of instruction in which a father faced, across the mirror-image alignment of pieces on a chessboard, his son (a diminutive image of himself) and, in demonstrating the paradoxes of Zeno and Berkeleyan idealism, showed him the dreamlike status of reality. In thinking back on that scene, perhaps Borges was reminded of Alice's words near the end of *Through the Looking Glass*: "So I wasn't dreaming, after all . . . unless—unless we're all part of the same dream. Only I do hope it's *my* dream, and not the Red King's! I don't like belonging to another person's dream" (293).

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NOTES

1 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," in his *Ficciones*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York, 1962), p. 99.

2 Jorge Luis Borges, "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," in *Ficciones*, p. 74.

- 3 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Ficciones*, p. 20; hereafter cited in text as T.
- 4 Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," in his *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969* (New York, 1978), p. 207; hereafter cited in text as A.
- 5 Reuben Fine, quoted in Alexander Cockburn, *Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death* (New York, 1974), p. 42; hereafter cited in text.
- 6 Jorge Luis Borges, *Atlas*, tr. Anthony Kerrigan (New York, 1985), p. 37.
- 7 Plutarch, "Theseus and Romulus," *Lives*, tr. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Mass., 1914), I, 197.
- 8 Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights* (New York, 1984), p. 36; hereafter cited in text as SN.
- 9 Jorge Luis Borges, "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth," in *The Aleph and Other Stories*, p. 125.
- 10 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (New York, 1910–11), III, 824.
- 11 Jorge Luis Borges, "Chess," in *Borges: A Reader, A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid (New York, 1981), p. 281.
- 12 Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York, 1978), p. 285; hereafter cited in text as JLB.
- 13 Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (New York, 1970), p. 158.
- 14 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Sect of the Phoenix," in *Ficciones*, pp. 165–66.
- 15 Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York, 1969), p. 190, n. 19.
- 16 Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952* (New York, 1965), p. 60.
- 17 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins," in *Ficciones*, p. 58; hereafter cited in text.
- 18 Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* (Cleveland, 1963), p. 238; hereafter cited in text.